

# **WHY IS CHINA ABSENT FROM THE HUMAN REMAINS DEBATE**

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## **Abstract**

The display of human remains has been widely studied and discussed by archaeologists and museum curators all around the world. The discussion on this topic involves the ethics, policies, and display methods faced by museums concerning the repatriation, storage, care, management and interpretation of human remains. China, however, has been absent from this debate. It is not that Chinese museums do not display human remains. On the contrary, some Chinese museums do exhibit human remains and proper practices and respect have been shown in some museums. In order to find out the reasons of China's absence from the human remains debate, this article will review the relevant literature of Britain and China and analyse the possible reasons from four aspects, respectively: repatriation claims, authority, changed Chinese culture and display tendency. Besides, one case study of a Western Han dynasty female corpse displayed in the Hunan Museum will be reviewed as access to the Chinese context.

# Why is China Absent from the Human Remains Debate

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

About one month after I started my archaeology course, a small question came into my attention. Why human remains need to be displayed in museums and how human remains should be presented to museum audiences. Such a question that seems to be familiar to my English teachers and classmates, but a question I have never thought about it.

From my personal experience, the only human remains I can remember seeing in a museum are the prehistoric human bones on display in the Anthropology Museum of Xiamen University to explain human evolution. What Swain (2013) said about the British public's familiarity with human remains in museums is something I have never felt. If I walk into a Chinese museum, what I expect, and what most Chinese people expect, is fine bronzes, jade, paintings, not mummies or human skeletons.

Initially, I blamed my confusion on my previous unfamiliarity with archaeology and museology. After a brief review, I found that not only British scholars have conducted detailed discussions and researches on human remains from the aspects of acquisition, storage, preservation, display, etc, but many countries in the world, including the United States and Australia, have been discussing this issue for decades. However, when I tried to consult Chinese scholars' opinions on the subject, the results were surprisingly few. In order to understand the situation of the display of human remains in Chinese museums and why has China not been participating in the worldwide discussion of human remains, I started this research.

In this article, I will first review the background and literature on human remains in Britain and China. For the British situation, this human remains issue started from the discussion of repatriation claims by indigenous communities and gradually extended to all human remains in the museum. From some international standards for the handling of human remains to the UK's special legislation and policy on human remains; from the exploration of appropriate exhibition methods of human remains, to the reflection on the social responsibilities of museums and even the western society and culture, along with the discussion of some practical cases, the issue of human remains in the UK has been discussed detailly and comprehensively.

In contrast, there has been much less academic discussion of human remains in China. The human remains on display in Chinese museums are rare and mostly prehistoric human remains in the context of evolution. For human remains in the historical period, most of them are special undecomposed bodies, some in the context of ancient Chinese burial, and some in the context of natural mummification. For the typical historical human remains like skeletons, I have not found any museums with such remains on display during my research, but there might be museums displayed them with anatomical and medical contexts. For human remains dead for a shorter time, the only case I have found is a memorial museum in Nanjing with a hall displaying human remains of victims of the Nanjing massacre in the World War ii, using human remains as a witness and a reminder of the painful memory. The display of the chairman Mao's body in the memorial building in Beijing will not be



discussed here. Because such memorial building with the single display of the great leader's body cannot be distinguished as a museum, and the purpose and motivation behind this display is too political and sensitive to be considered as other human remains displays.

The Hunan Museum in central China and its exhibition of an ancient Chinese female body will be studied in chapter 3 as the best practice of Chinese human remains display. There are two reasons for this judgement. Firstly, this special ancient corpse has not decomposed for two thousand years and the scale and quality of burial goods is remarkable. Secondly, the Hunan Museum has been exploring the better display of this corpse along with her burial goods for more than 40 years, and proper respect has been presented. Through studying this case, we can understand how museums can properly display human remains while meeting the requirements of authorities and expectations of traditional Chinese culture.

To answer the question that why China has been absent from the discussion of human remains, four aspects will be analysed: repatriation, authority, traditional culture and display tendency. According to British scholars' discussions of human remains, these aspects have a great influence on this issue. By studying the situations in China from these perspectives, it can be understood why there are relatively few human remains on display in Chinese museums, and further understand why this issue has not been discussed by Chinese scholars.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

In this chapter, I will review the resources of this ongoing debate about human remains in museums in both contexts of the UK and China. As introduced before, Chinese scholars and Chinese public are surprisingly silent on this issue, researches and publications about human remains in China is much less than that in Britain. I will start with a focus on British resources because the issue of human remains has been discussed on a large scale in Britain from many aspects such as repatriation, politics, policies, ethics, etc. For Chinese situations, researches on human remains focus more on the study and preservation of special ancient corpses and papers related to other perspectives are relatively rare.

### **2.1 Human remains in UK museums**

#### **2.1.1 Background and repatriation**

Human remains held by museums and other institutions first became a debate topic in the 1960s and 70s in America and Australia because of the campaign movements by indigenous groups asking for return and reburial of their dead ancestors (Fforde 2004: 89). These movements soon spread to a worldwide phenomenon including Canada and New Zealand in the 1980s (Jenkins 2012). Britain then joined the debate of this issue in the 1990s. At that time, British researchers debated the issue of 'reburial', which was soon replaced by another term 'repatriation' to emphasize the return of ancestors to 'home', to answer the call for 'making amends for past wrongs' (Jenkins 2011, 17). Scholars such as Jane Hubert

(1989) studied the origin of human remains acquisitions by British museums and indicate that the legitimacy and rationality of obtaining these remains are highly worth-discussing, which is also the reason why British museums need to make amends for past wrongs in colonial period (see also Fforde 2002; Simpson 1996; Richardson 1989; Giesen and White 2013).

At the same time, there are, of course, scholars who disagree with the repatriation of ancient human remains, especially scientists, anthropologists and archaeologists who use human remains as their research materials. Mulvaney (1991) as one of those opponents claims that some ancient human remains are too old to be connected to any present descendants not only in the genetical aspect but in the cultural part. Payne (2004) holds a similar idea that the repatriation of those human remains which died a short time ago and have a stronger connection with indigenous people was 'almost certainly right', but not for those thousands years old human remains. Another important argument against repatriation is the scientific value of human remains. As stated in '*the British Museum policy on human remains*' (principle 5.2):

Human remains are a record of the varied ways that different societies have conceived of death and disposed of the remains of the dead. Human remains in the Collection help advance important research in fields such as archaeology, human biology, the history of disease, palaeoepidemiology, bioarchaeology, physical anthropology, forensics and genetics. Human remains, which have been physically modified by a person working within a cultural context, or which form part of an archaeological record, illuminate other objects in the collection  
(Trustees of the British Museum 2013, 3).

However, Swain (2013) questions this overemphasis on 'huge potential for future knowledge', arguing that it is used by some archaeologists but without specific explanation, just to defend the repatriation. As for the possible loss of educational significance of human remains in museum exhibitions, real human remains have been used in art and medical education for centuries, and to some extent their educational value is irreplaceable (Alberti, et al. 2009). However, Woodhead (2002) points out that if human remains are really required for educational function, then well-made replicas sometimes can have the same effect.

As people debated the relative merits of the scientific potentials and the emotional therapeutic benefits, another aspect to view this repatriation issue was emerging. Instead of concentrating on the human remains, Jenkins (2008) analyses why the issue of human remains repatriation has caused such a big debate in the UK. In addition to external claims and visitors' opinions on this issue, the reason, she argued, was more from the internal part of museums. She argues that the continuing debate among museum professionals over human remains reflects doubts about the traditional social function of museums as a legislator of knowledge and a cultural authority (see also Jenkins 2011; 2012; 2016).

Many scholars believe that conflicts between different worldviews are the cause of these human remains related issues. Giesen and White (2013, 16-17) use the discrepancy of three different worldviews of looking at the relationship between the dead and the body to explain the difference between western societies and indigenous groups. They explain that museums tend to adopt a dualist or a

materialist worldview, in which their human remains collections are inanimate objects, separate from the spirits once they had. However, indigenous groups such as many Native Americans believe in the afterlife and that if their dead bodies are not buried, their souls will wander in eternity (Hubert 1992). As stated by Harrison (2003), the buried ancestors are the link between the past and the future of the indigenous people, and the grave goods of the ancestors is their sacred spiritual heritage for future generations.

There is an additional way to look at the repatriation issue which is the political implications of the repatriations. 'Doing the right thing' was one of the main points of contentions when British academics joined the debate. The repatriation of the bones is not simply a matter of respect for the culture of indigenous communities and healing of their past hurts. The repatriation campaigns are dialogues between the former colonizers and the colonized communities (McGuire 1994; Woodhead 2002). From a political point of view, the cost of the repatriation campaign for politicians is very low, only at the expense of some archaeologists' research materials. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why these repatriation campaigns can get the government support (Nail 1994). From the point of view of the claim makers, through the repatriation campaigns, indigenous communities can strengthen their cultural identity, help them to support their rights from other aspects, and it serves as a manifestation of the correcting the injustices of the past colonial era (Mays & Smith 2009). At the same time, some British pagan groups joined the stage by asking for an equal right to those aboriginal groups and campaigning for the reburial of

ancient British human remains. Pagan groups such as the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO) and Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) voiced concerns about the treatment of pre-Christian remains and campaigned for reburial, ritual, and respect in the 2000s (Jenkins 2016). Even though their claims appeared ethical and religious, as Jenkins (2009) states, 'the demands are less about old bones than about winning affirmation of the legitimacy of Paganism from cultural organisations. These are, fundamentally, claims for recognition'.

### **2.1.2 Legitimacy and policies**

This worldwide debate on human remains and repatriation has also had an impact on national and international legislation and regulations. Many scholars have studied this aspect (see, for instance, Lohman & Goodnow 2006; Cassman, et al. 2007; Jenkins 2011; Giesen 2013). The International Council of Museums adopted the *Code of Ethics for Museums* in 1986, advices on the minimum standards of professional practice and performance for museums. In the part of human remains, it states that where human remains are on display, 'this must be done with tact and with respect for the feeling for human dignity held by all peoples'. And where human remains or sacred objects are hold in collections, accesses should always be available to proper purposes, but not to the 'morbidly curious'. Although these statements provide only the most basic and general norms for museum staffs, they put the dignity of human remains as human beings in an important position, which provides reference for future legislation and guidance.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007) refers to the issue of human remains from indigenous groups in the Article 12: '1. Indigenous peoples have the right to ... the repatriation of their human remains. 2. States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned.' Although it is a non-legally-binding document, the declaration is an internationally recognized standard of ethical conduct and sets the basis for the indigenous people to negotiate the access or claim the repatriation of their ancestral remains (Giesen & White 2013).

Many scholars have discussed the legislation of human remains repatriation and practice in other countries, such as the United States, Australia and New Zealand (see, for instance, Seidemann 2004; Sanders 2005), but we will not repeat it here and review the situation in Britain. The Museum Ethnographers' Group (MEG) adopted guidelines for the care, management, display, interpretation and repatriation of human remains in UK collections, which is the first UK museum association to draft a set of professional guidelines (Giesen 2013). The guidelines also note that the handling of human remains in museums should follow the case-by-case principle because of the complex and sensitive aspects involved (Woodhead 2002), and this principle is adopted by later documents about human remains (Mays & Smith 2009). The *Human Tissue Act 2004 (HTAct)* sets out the legal regime for institutions and activities related to recently deceased human remains. For deceased persons or any

relevant material from a human body that died for less than 100 years, institutions need to get licenced and obtain permits through the Human Tissue Authority (HTAuth). Although this is an act that focuses more on the recent death of human bodies, its 47th section also deals with the practice of museums, which has the purpose of solving the repatriation requirements faced by some British museums at that time (White 2013). The *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (Guidance)* was published by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) in 2005 (DCMS 2005). Unlike the *HTAct*, which focuses more on bodies who have been dead for less than 100 years, the *Guidance* provide a systematic set of procedures for all human remains collected in museums. As a document without legal force, it provides ethical guidance for the acquisition, care, claims for return, storage and display of human remains collected in museums. Even though much of the *Guidance* takes into account the claims and practice of repatriation of human remains from outside the UK, it remains the most influential document on the human remain subject in England and Wales and has been adopted by most museums (Woodhead 2013; Swain 2016; see also White 2011 for the detailed impact and effectiveness of the *HTAct* 2004 and the *Guidance* 2005). For situations in Scotland, the parliament of Scotland enacted the *Human Tissue (Scotland) Act (HT(S)Act)* in 2006, and the Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) published the *Guidelines for the Care of Human Remains in Scottish Museum Collections (Guidelines)* in 2011. Although criticized for being too similar to the *HTAct* 2004 and the *Guidance* 2005, these two documents with special interests based on the Scottish situation are



still of guiding value to the practice of museums in Scotland (Sharp & Hall 2013).

### **2.1.3 Extended debate**

In addition to the above researches about the human remains issue, there are many papers and books discussing other aspects. Several surveys of the scope of human remains held in English museums have shown that the number is relatively large. Weeks and Bott (2003, 11) conducted a survey on behalf of the Ministerial Working Group on Human Remains to 'investigate the broad scope of human remains held in English collections' and estimated that at least 61,000 human remains were present in 132 English museums. A more detailed survey was conducted by White in 2011. By contacting 806 English museums and combining secondary source data, she estimates that the minimum number of human remains in British museums is between 111,065 and 113,217 individuals/human remains (White 2011, 133). According to both surveys, the vast majority of human remains in museums in England come from within the UK, with only a small portion from outside. Consequently, the topic of debate has expanded from the focus on repatriation to the challenges for the preservation, storage, curation and display of all human remains.

The book *Human Remains: Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions* edited by Cassman, Odegaard and Powell (2007) is a landmark work on the issue of human remains. The 17 chapters in this book cover a wide range of related issues including ethics, policies, condition assessment, storage and transport of human remains as well as associated artefacts in museums. Even twelve years later, the book

is still a practical guide for museums dealing with human remains. The idea, showed in most chapters, that human remains should be viewed not as archaeological collections but as a different kind of collection requiring unique policies, procedures and protocols. Although the book is not specific to the UK situation, it provides guidance that British museums can learn from. Giesen (2013) addressed the UK situation through a series of chapters. In this book, archaeologists and museum curators give their comprehensive considerations and helpful suggestions on the policies, ethics and practices of human remains in the context of UK. Examples with good human remains practices including the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of London and the Great North Museum are presented, giving reference to other British museums facing the similar problem. This book also points to the ethical and practical difficulties that museums are facing in dealing with human remains, as well as possible directions for the way forward. The British Museum, the country's most important museum with a collection of over 6,000 human remains (Antoine 2014), has been the focus of the repatriation claims and the focus of British human remains issue discussion. *The British Museum policy on human remains in the collection* was approved July 2013. This policy sets up the 'principles governing the holding, display, care for and study of human remains in the Museum's Collection, and the principles by which the Trustees of the British Museum will exercise their power to transfer human remains'. Detailed procedures are presented for claims of repatriation of human remains in different situations. It shows a careful consideration of the sensitive issue of human remains with a central idea of

attempting the balance between the interests of general public and the emotional and cultural needs of indigenous groups. In 2014, a book edited by Fletcher, Antoine and Hill, is published by the British Museum on the basis of its practices and policies. It presents detailed cases of the British Museum's experience on the issues of repatriation, display, conservation, documentation and research of human remains in their collections. Supported by the British Museum's vast amount and diversity of collections, the book covers many aspects from bog bodies to ancient Egyptian mummies, from repatriation to display and research. the British Museum has shown its professionalism on the human remains issue.

Surveys into the subject of human remains has shown that the British public is generally comfortable, even welcoming, seeing human remains in museums. Kilmister (2003) conducted a survey of visitors to displays of ancient Egyptian remains in UK museums. According to the survey results, the majority (82.5%) of 300 respondents supported display and 14.2% wanted a 'more appropriate and respectful environment' for the displayed remains. A survey conducted by English Heritage in 2009 with a sample of 864 adults in England shows that the majority (91%) agree that museums should be allowed to display human bones and keep human bones for research purposes (English Heritage 2009). Similar results (79% expecting to see human remains on display in museums) can be found also in Carroll's (2005) survey report.

Swain (2016) indicates that British public is quite familiar with seeing different kinds of human remains in museums since it has been displayed so for a long time

(see also Giesen 2013; Alberti, et al. 2009; Day 2014). Woodhead (2002) suggests that British people is not a culturally close knit community and there is no one common religion in Britain, also beliefs and attitudes towards the treatment of deceased people are not continued like some other indigenous groups. This might be the reason why British people do not feel culturally attached to museum displayed human remains and feel welcome to that. Further, a disconnection between western general public and the dead caused by the modern western death rituals made museums became the only circumstance to see the dead (Alberti, et al. 2009; Hibbs 2007; Day 2014). Thus, in addition to academic value, the human remains in museums do have another role to play in modern society, allowing the public to explore the human experience, collective and individual (Sayer 2010).

Although the British public generally welcomes the display of human remains and believes that human remains should be displayed with more dignity and respect, there still has been no standard conclusion for what the proper way is to display. Many scholars have discussed a topic: whether human remains on display in museums are human beings or objects? Brooks and Rumsey (2007) indicates that bodies and body parts have been commoditized for religious veneration or political purposes and archaeologists and museum curators have been seeing human remains as objects for a long time (see also, Swain 2016). Different attitudes towards human remains in museums can be seen from the words chose by the staffs involved. Words including *artefact*, *object*, *specimen*, *decedent*, and *corpse* imply the distance between staffs and remains, while *individual*, *person* and *human remains* convey the

sense of seeing them as once lived persons (Cassman & Odegaard 2007: 1). As the discussion of human remains deepens, people are coming to realize that although human remains can hardly be seen as persons but thinking of them as objects is definitely inappropriate. Some argue that displaying human remains alongside other objects makes the visitors easier to objectify those human remains (Carpenter 2008) and keeping isolated areas for human remains can enhance the atmosphere of respect (Kilminster 2003). Others point that context can be helpful to rebuild the personality of exhibited human remains and keep the dead in some sense alive by relating the narratives of their lives (Rathouse 2011). According to Swaney (2013), because of the commercial use of ancient Egyptian mummies in modern culture such as horror movies and TV shows, theatrically imagined fascination instead of proper respect may be created by visitors when they are viewing mummies in museums. Appropriate individual biographies and related cultural relics could be helpful to narrow the gap between 'seeing an Egyptian mummy and experiencing the mummy as the physical remains of an ancient Egyptian' (see also, Stienne 2016; Day 2014).

#### **2.1.4 Widely discussed cases**

Although many British museums have human remains in their collections, a few cases relating to the curation and display of human remains stand out and have been repeatedly mentioned by scholars.

The Museum of London held the exhibition *London Bodies* between October 1998 and February 1999. With Perspex covers and mortuary trolleys, a series of

skeletons were shown to present the skeletal changes of Londoners prehistoric times as well as some specific medical cases including skeletons of an unborn child in the mother's pelvis (Swain 2002; 2016). This exhibition is special. On the one hand, it shows the scientific value of human remains in archaeology to the society through the sensitive contents of a large number of human skeletons; on the other hand, it needs to be treated with extreme respect and care by the curators to avoid arousing public dislike. As one of the curators of the *London Bodies*, Hedley Swain (2002) illustrates that experts and specialists, both inside and outside the museum, have been consulted on how best to balance the rights of these departed Londoners with the stories that the museum wants to tell. However, while ethical considerations were discussed before the exhibition, they were more from the perspective of the audience than the rights of those skeletons (Swain 2013). Meanwhile, media publicity for this display continues to draw upon the appalling aspects of the skeletons in the exhibition: journalists were invited to a themed breakfast of 'long bone toast' and 'bloody (strawberry) fruit juice' before being given torches and being informed by white-coated specialists in a darkened basement (Swain 2002). Some believe that the curators might have the hope that these sensitive exhibits can be treated with dignity, but the culture and public of western society will still view through the perspective of curiosity and gaze at the sensational aspects (Alberti, et al. 2009).

The Manchester Museum became the centre of human remains debates as well as national and international discussions because of the decision to entirely

cover three unwrapped ancient Egyptian mummies with linen sheets in May 2008. This controversial action happened at the time that the topic of human remains had been expanded from the remains of abroad indigenous ancestors to the display of other more general human remains including Egyptian mummies which had been displayed without controversy for decades (Exell 2016; Stienne 2016). The intention behind covering the mummies is to provoke public discussions on such sensitive exhibitions and to assess public reactions to find a better access of human remains for visitors with more respect (Jenkins 2011; Exell 2016). However, most of the reaction had been negative, with the media and public commentary doubting this action that can hardly provide respect for the dead Egyptian ancestors, and some even suspected it was due to the personal relationships of some of the curators of the Manchester Museum with some pagan groups (Jenkins 2011). As Day (2014) states, The question is not whether museums should display these Egyptian mummies, but rather whether the public should come to these exhibitions with inappropriate minds, which should be attributed to the lack of awareness of death and dead bodies in western society. At the same time, he suggests it is better for the society to rethink about schools, parenting and, in particular, the media instead of asking how to fix museums.

The *Body Worlds* is an exhibition of dissected human and animal bodies which have been preserved by the procedure of plastination, a technique invented by German scientist Gunther von Hagens in the 1970s. By replacing water in the body tissues with plastic, plastination can preserve the anatomical body in a dry, odourless

and durable way and present more details for the educational value. Since first exhibition in 1995, the *Body Worlds* have attracted more than 48 million visitors in over 140 cities across America, Africa, Asia, and Europe<sup>1</sup>. Although this exhibition is not a traditional museum exhibition in the archaeological sense, its special application and display of human bodies still attracts a lot of attention and discussion in the aspects of curation and public education. There have been studies that have looked at the attitudes of different audiences to these particular and even somewhat bizarre exhibitions from a visitor's point of view, in which some people feel scared or sick with those over-realistic exhibits while others find it interesting, educative and instructive (see, for instance, Leiberich, et al. 2006; Walter 2004; Moore & Brown 2007; Jagger 2012). Comments and opinions from scholars on the *Body Worlds* exhibition are also very polarized. Hibbs (2007) criticizes this type of exhibition and argues vehemently that the *Body Worlds* exhibition is 'merely feeding our inordinate taste for the macabre while masquerading as science education' and compares it to 'a pornography of the dead human body'. Optimistically, however, the exhibition does offer the public an unparalleled opportunity to get close to the nature of the human body, which may stimulate some young students' interest in anatomy and biology (Alberti, et al. 2009). And some visitors came up with positive ideas, such as doing more exercising and quitting smoking, after seeing the display of some diseased body parts (Moore & Brown 2007). Also, some relatively neutral scholars recognize the ethical and moral complexities inherent in such exhibitions and point

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<sup>1</sup> Body Worlds official website. <https://bodyworlds.com>. Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2019.



out that people with different worldviews are bound to produce some opposite reactions (Goulding, et al. 2012). After all, whether or not it is intended as an exhibition of terror and curiosity to attract visitors, the *Body Worlds* exhibition is a private exhibition held by von Hagens' company with a concentrated theme, and its social obligations and responsibilities are different from those of the state hold museums. Such an exhibition is understandable and acceptable as long as visitors are aware of and curious about the contents (Woodhead 2002).

## **2.2 Human remains in Chinese museums**

While the whole world is debating on the issue of the display and repatriation of human remains, China's archaeologists and museologists are fairly quiet about this. Before we get into detailed articles and discourses, it is necessary to understand the background of Chinese human remains studies from the perspective of linguistics and translation. In the UK and much of the world, the term 'human remains' is used almost by default to refer to all dead human bodies and body parts including Egyptian mummies, bog bodies, and the most common human skeletons and bones. While in China, human remains (人类遗骸) are generally categorised into two broad categories, one for skeletons and bones (骸骨) which are most commonly found in archaeological excavations, and the other for 'ancient corpses' (古尸) which are incompletely decomposed for various reasons. In Chinese archaeology and public perception, ancient corpses are far more important and socially influential than ordinary skeletons. Human remains displayed in some museums are mostly ancient

corpses while some human bones and skeletons are presented mostly in the context of prehistorical anthropology and biological evolution.

There are some papers study special Chinese ancient corpses, including well preserved ‘wet bodies’, natural mummified ‘dry bodies’, adipocere and bog bodies. These researches are mainly about the archaeological and biological studies of the bodies as well as the preservation methods. Very limited articles cover the aspects of museum curations and ethics of human remains. As for policies and related researches, they are almost non-existent, compared with the UK and the rest of the world. The well discussed *Body Worlds* exhibition has also travelled to China and attracted some discourses by scholars and the media. Some of these mentioned aspects will be reviewed in this chapter.

### **2.2.1 Legitimacy and policies**

In China, there is no specific law or document on human remains under the scope of archaeology and museums. The only law that can be referred to is the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics* (PCR) enacted in 1982, in which Article 2 defines the category of cultural relics. In addition to the description of cultural relics in the general sense, such as artefacts and buildings, the article mentions that ‘fossils of ancient animals and ancient humans with scientific value are protected by the state as cultural relics’. For human remains that have not been fossilized, some scholars think it can refer to article 2 (5) of the PCR: ‘material objects (实物) that can reflect the society, life and culture of different periods in

history' and be treated as special cultural relics (Li 2010). Other rules and documents governing archaeological work and museum operations do not specify human remains.

Among the international regulations China participates in, the one most associated with human remains is the ICoM *Code of Ethics for Museums* in 1986. The Chinese Museum Association (CMA) became a member of the ICoM in 1983. The *Charter of CMA* (2014) clearly stipulates that the working standards of Chinese museums should comply with the provisions of the ICoM *Code*.

### **2.2.2 Studies of ancient corpses**

In traditional Chinese culture, funerals and related ceremonies and rituals are very important. The scale and value of tomb goods can show the family's wealth, and large funerals are also a way for people to show respect for their dead elders (Li 2011). Tomb raiding has been seen as awfully disrespectful to ancestors and will face extreme crime accusations in any dynasty, including modern times. When modern scientific archaeology was introduced to China at the beginning of the 20th century, although the study of ancient objects has a history of more than 1,000 years, archaeological excavations of tombs were still seen as disrespectful to ancestors and were likened to tomb raiding (Luo 1998). For quite a long time, Chinese archaeologists paid more attention to the unearthed tomb goods and precious artefacts and osteology studies of human remains are scarce (Yan 1958). This neglect of human remains in archaeological researches has been a constant. In 2016, the

Institute of Chinese Archaeology held the first Chinese Osteology Conference, but the theme of the conference was still focused on the study of human remains in prehistoric periods<sup>2</sup>.

An important discovery in the 1970s led archaeologists to focus on special ancient corpses. A female body who hasn't decomposed for 2,000 years has been found in Mawangdui area, Changsha, Hunan. The archaeological excavation of Mawangdui contains three Western Han dynasty (206 BC – 9 AD) tombs and unearthed a large number of precious cultural relics. The owner of tomb No.1 is a regional marquise, died in her 50s, has been perfectly preserved. Her skin was elastic at the time revealed, and most of the body's tissues, including the internal organs and brain, remained intact (Hunan Museum & Institute of Archaeology 1973). The discovery of this special ancient corpse shocked Chinese archaeologists and aroused the attention of the whole country with the long time span of more than 2,000 years, good preservation, high social status and a large number of precious tomb goods. The discovery of this ancient corpse as well as the whole tomb has become one of the most important archaeological discoveries in China in the 20th century and has also enhanced the enthusiasm of archaeologists to study the Chinese special ancient corpses (Kou 2013). Shortly after the excavation, Yang (1972) identified the name of the female corpse as Xinzhui (辛追), the wife of a local marquis, based on ancient history records and the Chinese characters on the tomb goods. In 1973, written by the Hunan Museum and the Institute of Archaeology, the archaeological excavation

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<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Chinese Archaeology. Summary of the first Chinese Osteology Conference. (In Chinese). <http://www.kaogu.cn/zixun/shoujiezhongguokaoguxuedahui/zwhfztl/20160608/54257.html>

report, *Changsha Mawangdui Han Tomb No.1* was published. The report details artefacts unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tomb No.1, including numerous silk garments, silk manuscripts and sculptures, as well as the excavation and dissection of this ancient female corpse. You (2012) concludes three possible reasons for the well preservation of the Mawangdui ancient corpse, separately, 1, the cooling treatment before burial, 2, the sealing environment of the coffin covered with white plaster mud, and 3, the protection of the special liquid inside the coffin (also see, Hou 1981; Zhang 2010; Peng 2014). From a museological and curatorial point of view, Chen (2012) states ancient corpses such as this female corpse represent a special kind of exhibit in the context of museum curation and exhibition, which can have a value of public education. By mentioning the *Code of Ethics for Museums* in 1986, adopted by the International Council of Museums, Chen indicates the display of ancient corpse should be handled with 'human dignity that can be acknowledged by all' (Chen 2012). British scholar Hedley Swain also mentioned the ancient corpse in two of his articles in 2013 and 2016. In a few paragraphs, he briefly introduced the situation of human remains display in Chinese museums, which is that the display of human skeletons is pretty rare and display of special ancient corpse has been curated in a good manner without ethical controversy just like the marquis in the Hunan Museum (Swain 2013; 2016). More details of the archaeological findings of Mawangdui No.1 tomb and the ancient female corpse will be analysed in later chapter.

After the excavation of Mawangdui tombs, a similar ancient corpse was excavated in 1975 in the western Han dynasty tomb No. 168 at Phoenix Hill in Hubei

province. The corpse is a male, lived in western Han dynasty and died in his 60s. According to the characters on tomb goods, Wu, Tian and Zeng (1980) thoroughly analyses the preservation status and personal biography of the male corpse. By carved texts on a bamboo slip, which is kind of a passport of the male for showing his identity to 'the officers under the ground', the male was a 'Wu Daifu' (a title of a regional officer, likely equal to county magistrate) and buried at the year of 167 BC. As witnesses of the excavation of this ancient corpse, the authors describes the external appearance was 'so fairly intact that it looked, at first glance, just like an old man in sound sleep. The soft tissues remained elastic and all joints were still movable' (Wu, et al. 1980). Chen (2006) as one of the participant archaeologists, reviews the digging stories of this tomb and indicates that the preservation condition of this male ancient corpse is better than the female ancient corpse in Mawangdui. This ancient male corpse is now on display in the Jingzhou Museum, a municipal state-owned museum in Hubei province.

These two ancient corpses have become important research objects for scholars to study physical anthropology, ancient pathology, western Han dynasty culture and ancient Chinese preservative methods (Kou 2013). By comparing the similarities and differences of burial conditions of these two corpses, Shang (1978) believes that the liquid inside the coffin is the key reason why the body can be preserved, although the composition of the liquid is not clear. Hou (1981) agrees that the special fluids in both caskets had an important role in preserving the body, but at the same time he argues that the decay of the body did not stop completely, it just

became extremely slow. Liu (2014) compares the western Han dynasty's preservation technology of ancient corpses with that of Egyptian mummies, and points out that, unlike the ancient Egyptians who achieved the preservation by modifying directly on the body, the western Han dynasty's embalming method paid more attention to controlling the external environment of corpses. But it is clear that the effectiveness of ancient Chinese antiseptic techniques was largely accidental, with most bodies eventually found decayed.

These ancient corpses which were preserved intact with soft skins and organs and have been categorised by Chinese archaeologists as 'wet bodies' (湿尸) or 'soft bodies' (柔尸). However, most of the ancient corpses found in Xinjiang, China, are naturally mummified bodies and categorised as 'dry bodies' (干尸). The dry bodies have gone through a completely natural dehydration process because of the extremely dry conditions where they were buried (Huang 1984). The earliest written record of the ancient dry bodies in Xinjiang province comes from the book *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, written by the monk Xuanzang in Tang dynasty (618 AD -907 AD). It is mentioned that somewhere in the Pamirs, people buried the dead in dry caves on the cliffs. The dead bodies remained undecayed for years, posterity will change the body's clothes every year (Xuanzang 7<sup>th</sup> century, cited by Liu 1986). Yang (2016) introduces two most famous Xinjiang dry bodies, one is the 'beauty of Loulan' (楼兰美女) died around 3,800 years ago, which is the oldest dry body found in Xinjiang, the other is the 'princess of Xiaohe' (小河公主) died about 3,700 years ago.

As for other ancient corpses, not only have few been found, but also few studies have been done on them. Shan and Chu (1986) record the discovery of an adipocere of Ming dynasty found in 1975. They introduce the original situation of the body which was transformed into an adipocere naturally and the site autopsy process shows the internal organs and tissues are well preserved and look like those preserved in formalin (Shan & Chu 1986). However, what happened to the body stayed unknown and this article is the only published record of ancient adipocere in Chinese archaeology (Kou 2013). As for bog bodies, there is only one bog body died in Ming dynasty (1368 AD – 1644 AD) found in Shanghai and the present situation of this body is also unknown (Liu 2014).

### **2.2.3 Curation and Ethics**

There are very few articles considering human remains from the perspective of museum curation and archaeological ethics in China. Liang (1988) indicates the scientific and educational importance of collecting, studying and displaying human remains. While acknowledging the importance of human remains, Zhao and Zeng (2016) believes that compared with western social museums, Chinese museums have almost no restrictions on the display of human remains, which is an advantage that should be taken by curators. Li (2010) demonstrates that although excavated human remains cannot be distinguished into the category of cultural relics by Chinese laws and policies, the scientific value and cultural influence hold by the remains can give them the equal importance to cultural relics. Zhang (2012) analyse Chinese ethics to



human remains and to excavations of tombs, in which the humble respect to dead ancients is always important since ancient periods. By comparing with the ethics in the United States, Yu (2011) indicates that Chinese archaeologists should pay more attention to human remains during the whole process and states that a balance between science and ethics is achievable in appropriate methods. Wei (2007) introduces the benefits of using 3D imaging technology in the display of human remains, which can help build a connection between audiences and displayed human remains (also see, Wei, Sun & Zhang 2013). Zhang (2008) introduces some practical displaying methods for human remains including 3D imaging technology, restored archaeological sites and tombs and using soft warm light to ease the audience's fears. Most of these discussions are relatively superficial, and the relevant legislations, display, ethics and other aspects are rarely mentioned.

#### **2.2.4 Body worlds in China**

The famous but controversial human bodies exhibition has also travelled to some Chinese cities. In 1999, Hargens opened the world's largest plastination factory in Dalian, China. The first Body Worlds exhibition on mainland China was opened in 2004, Beijing (Zhang 2005). Since then, the Body Worlds exhibition have been held in other cities such as Dalian, Hangzhou and Chengdu. But online news of the exhibition gradually faded since 2010, and now, according to the official website of Body Worlds, the exhibition is no longer held in China. Most of the press coverage of the Body Worlds exhibition was introductory. Some reports acknowledge the educational

value of the exhibition from a scientific point of view, while some others question ethically the motives behind its use of human bodies (Zhang 2005). There is very little academic evaluation and discussion about this exhibition. Yu (2013) points out that plastination technology has important implications for anatomy education, but as a public exhibition it should be considered to reduce the artistic processing of specimens.

## **2.3 Conclusion**

After reviewing the literature of the human remains issue in both Britain and China, a significant absence can be seen in the Chinese context. Chinese archaeologists still look at human remains from the perspective of scientific research, and the relative importance attached to special ancient corpses and prehistoric human remains is also based on such a scientific perspective. The study and treatment of those ordinary human remains found in archaeological excavations has not even been discussed. As for museum display, the use of human remains is intentionally or unconsciously overlooked. Although Chinese scholars have not discussed much about the display of human remains in museums, we can still explore the practice of Chinese museums from specific cases. Considering the richness of accessible resources, the Western Han dynasty female corpse displayed in the Hunan Museum will be discussed in the next chapter as a case study. By reviewing the research history and exhibition methods of this ancient corpse and the whole Mawangdui archaeological site where she was discovered, we can understand the

attitude and practice of Chinese museums towards this special kind of corpses to a certain extent, so as to further understand the whole situation of China's human remains display.

By reviewing the resources in Britain, several important aspects of the human remains issue can be identified. Firstly, the repatriation claim is one of the reasons why this issue had been taken seriously by British society and even the world. Such cross-border campaigns have taken the issue of human remains to a political international level. Secondly, the question on the traditional authority of the museum and the reflection on the authority inside the museum also allow this topic to be discussed from a deeper level. Thirdly, there is no continuous and stable emotional sympathy for human remains in British society and culture, which makes the exhibition of human remains in museums acceptable to the public for a long time. Meanwhile, the extensive displays of human remains of different types by museums for different purposes has not only deepened the acceptance of the public, but also provided British scholars with more practical cases to discuss. In chapter 4, I will analyse the situation in China from the above four aspects and explain why China is absent from the discussion of human remains.

## **Chapter 3. the Hunan Museum and Mrs Xinzhui**

In this Chapter, the Hunan Museum (subsequently: HM) and the ancient female corpse (Mrs Xinzhui) mentioned above will be discussed as a best example of Chinese human remains display. Although no scholar has said that this case is the best in China, I insist on this view, because of the particularity of this corpse and the museum's careful consideration of the display from the perspective of preservation, curation and respect.

### **3.1 Introduction of the Hunan Museum**

The HM is located in Changsha, Hunan province, central China, where the Yangtze river passes by. Changsha is also a famous historical city with a long history. Many tombs from the western Han dynasty have been found in this area. As a provincial museum, also the largest and most important museum in Hunan province, it is the place where many cultural relics discovered by archaeological excavation are preserved and displayed. For now, HM has a collection of more than 180,000 specimens, especially the unearthed cultural relics from the western Han dynasty tomb of Mawangdui, bronzes of Shang and Zhou dynasty, Chu cultural relics, ancient ceramics, calligraphy and paintings<sup>3</sup>.

The history of the HM can date back to 1897, when a small museum was established for a short time as part of the Qing government's 'YangWu' movement (A failed economic revolution for learning the western culture and economy). In the

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<sup>3</sup> Hunan Museum, Introduction of the museum. <http://www.hnmuseum.com/en/aboutus/about-hnm>

following decades, the museum was reopened several times, but in the end it was destroyed by war in 1930 and was not rebuilt. After the founding of the PRC, the new HM was rebuilt in 1956 with the purpose of storing and displaying regional cultural relics and educating the public from aspects of history, culture, folklore, art and nature. As a major participant in the archaeological discovery of Mawangdui and the storage unit for the excavated cultural relics, a new 3,500-square-meter warehouse was built in 1973 for the HM and has been dedicated to the study, storage and display of Mawangdui archaeological findings including Mrs Xinzhui for nearly three decades. In 1999, a new building was built for storage and display, where Mrs Xinzhui and her tomb goods were put on a permanent thematic display. In 2010, the HM decided to renovate and expand the display building. The entire museum and the Mawangdui exhibition were suspended from 2012. After undergoing renovation and re-curation, the new *Mawangdui western Han tomb exhibition* reopened in 2017<sup>4</sup>.

The HM was selected as one of the first national first-class museums in 2008 and became one of the eight museums supported by both central and local governments in 2009. Therefore, with adequate financial guarantee and strong support from the government, the curators of the HM can focus all their efforts on providing better researches and exhibition.

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<sup>4</sup> Hunan Museum, History of the museum. <http://www.hnmuseum.com/en/aboutus/history>



figure 3. 1 The archaeological excavation site of Mawangdui. (Hunan Museum)

### **3.2 The excavation of Mrs Xinzhui**

The discovery and excavation of the western Han tomb in Mawangdui began in late 1971, and the field excavation (figure 3.1) of the No.1 tomb lasted more than half a year. Mrs Xinzhui's coffin was opened in April 1972, by then archaeologists came to realise that it was an ancient corpse that had not decayed for more than 2,000 years (Shan 2014). The excavation of all the three tombs in Mawangdui was completed in 1974, and a total of more than 3,000 precious cultural relics were excavated, including silk manuscripts, silk paintings, bamboo slips, silk cloth, lacquerware, musical instruments and so on (Yu 2017).

### **3.2.1 The background and the excavation**

It was the cold war period and the Chinese mainland was suffering the ‘cultural revolution’, fears of a potential war led many places to start building massive underground anti-aircraft projects. At the end of 1971, the Changsha city government planned to build a hospital in the Mawangdui area. While digging an air-raid shelter for the hospital, workers found special gases leaking from the soil which could be ignited to produce blue flames. When this phenomenon was reported to the HM, officers realized it was probably an ancient tomb and well preserved because the gas may come from the decayed organic objects inside the tomb. This is the beginning of the discovery of the western Han tomb of Mawangdui.

Full-scale field excavation began in early 1972. When archaeologists dug up the seal soil of the tomb, they found plenty of moist, sticky mud, a special mud called ‘White paste mud’ (白膏泥) and have been largely used in sealing and protecting tombs in Chinese ancient tombs (Shan 2014). The mud covered all six sides of the tomb, and the thickness of the mud around it reached 1.2 meters. After the mud was cleared, a large amount of charcoal appeared, which also covered the six sides of the coffin. Four trucks of charcoal which can have the effect of protecting the tomb from moisture, weighing over 5,000 kilograms, had been excavated. After the charcoal was thoroughly cleaned, the coffin appeared in the 20-meter deep pit. It is a wooden-made outer coffin (figure 3.2) with a length of 6.72 meters, a width of 4.88 meters and a height of 2.8 meters. The custom of burying the dead in multiple coffins

was very common in ancient China. The outermost large coffin can be understood as walls of the dead's house, where the deceased and all his/her burial goods are placed, which is why the outer coffin is always so huge (Ma 2010). The inner coffin is placed in the middle, surrounded by a wealth of burial goods, including a large number of lacquer-made house and living things, wooden figurines and silk fabrics. Wooden figurines (figure 3.3) symbolize servants who will continue to serve their master in the underworld. Other artefacts include everything that is needed in the real life was presented to ensure that the tomb's occupant continues to live a life of luxury in the underworld. Dozens of crops were found in some containers, including rice, barley, wheat, dates, bayberries and so on (Zhang 2010). The inner coffin is made up of four coffins (figure 3.4), small ones inside large ones just like Russian Matryoshka dolls, each of them has different decoration and paintings. Three inner coffins were transported back to the museum before being opened one by one, in which a seal inscribed with 'Wife Xin Zhui' was found to be direct evidence of the tomb's owner's identity. Lying in the innermost coffin, which was full of unknown liquid, Mrs Xinzhui was covered with more than 20 layers of silk or linen clothes, including all kinds of clothing needed to wear throughout the year. In these, One thin clothes (figure 3.5) made of silk is 1.28 meters long and weighs only 49 grams, which cannot be produced by modern technology (Shan 2014).



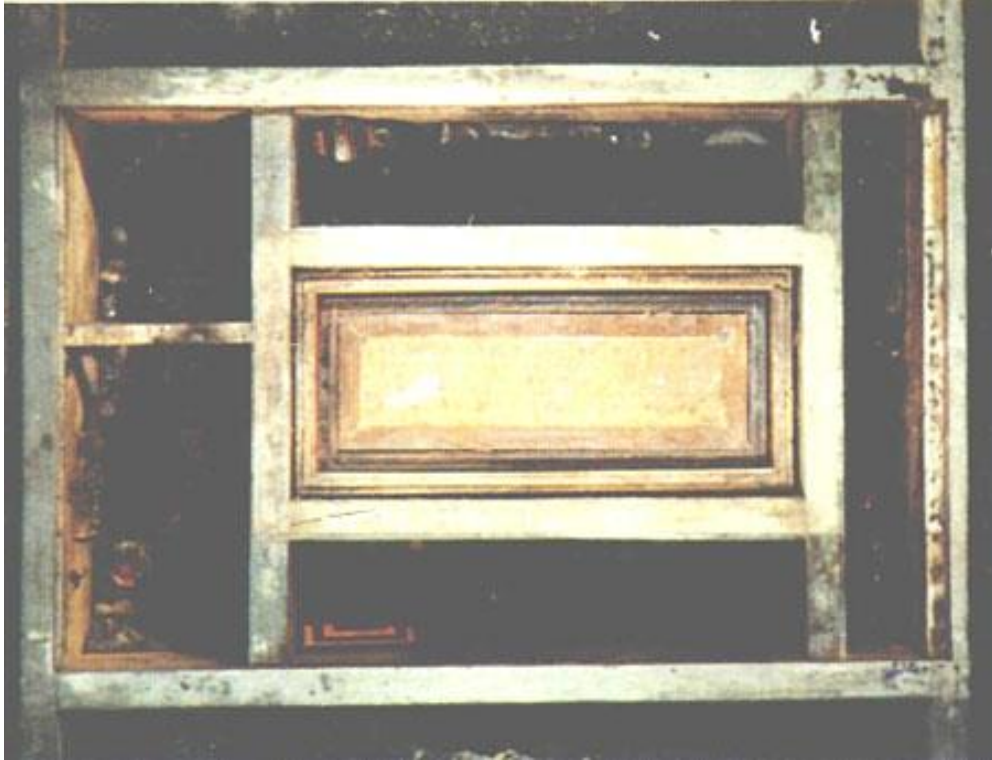


figure 3. 2 The wooden-made outer coffin with inner coffins in the middle, tomb goods are placed in the areas around the inner coffin. (Hunan Museum)



figure 3. 3 Wooden figurines symbolizing the servants who will play the musical instrument for their master in the underworld. (Hunan Museum)



figure 3. 4 Three inner coffins. (Hunan Museum)



figure 3. 5 Silk made clothes, 1.28 meters long and weighs only 49 grams. (Hunan Museum)



figure 3. 6 Mrs Xinzhui. (Baidu Baike, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/马王堆汉墓古尸/2457446?fromtitle=马王堆女尸&fromid=1093788>. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2019)

### 3.2.2 Post-excavation studies of Mrs Xinzhui

In May 1972, after 10 days work of removing all the covering clothes, archaeologists finally saw Mrs Xinzhui, a 50-years-old lady, who had elastic skin and looked like a corpse that had just passed away (figure 3.6). Temporary embalming procedure was conducted, and formalin solution can even be injected into her body directly through her veins (Shan 2014). The autopsy took place in December 1972, and the museum brought in anatomy experts from several important medical schools. The results showed that Mrs Xinzhui's meninges were well preserved while her brain had shrunk, and all the organs in her chest and abdominal cavity were intact and clearly recognisable. Pathological results showed that she had suffered from a variety of diseases including coronary heart disease, gallstones, schistosomiasis, lumbar disc herniation and so on. 138 undigested sweet melon seeds were found in her stomach and intestines, suggesting that she ate sweet melon in a short time before her death. Combined with her other health problems, medical experts speculated that Mrs Xinzhui's sudden death was due to acute biliary colic caused by eating too much

sweet melon, and the intense pain triggered an acute heart attack that killed her in a short time (Peng 2014).

Although 47 years have passed since the excavation, and the body has been thoroughly studied by scientists, it remains a mystery why Mrs Xinzhui has remained intact for more than 2,000 years. Archaeologists have proposed several possible scenarios. One is that large quantities of charcoal and white paste mud provide a stable and isolated environment, two is buried more than 20 meters deep to keep the temperature of the tomb chamber constant, three is the use of special preservatives before burial and the mysterious liquid inside the coffin (You 2012; also see, Hou 1981; Zhang 2010; Peng 2014). But whatever the reason for its preservation, the historical, archaeological, paleontological and paleopathological value of the whole Mawangdui discovery is incalculable (Chen 2012; Shan 2014).

### **3.3 Biography and the western Han culture**

#### **3.3.1 The lady and her family**

By studying the unearthed relics of all three tombs in Mawangdui, archaeologists have restored the personal biography of Mrs Xinzhui and her family story to a certain extent. Tomb No. 2 and tomb No. 3 were buried in almost the same manner as tomb No. 1, sealed with charcoal and white plaster mud as embalming measures, but disappointingly the bodies in both were completely decomposed into skeletons. This has led archaeologists to believe that Mrs Xinzhui in tomb 1 is a



special case. According to the unearthed cultural relics, the corpse's name of tomb No. 2 is Licang, who is the first marquis of Dai (a title of nobility with 700-households' fief) in western Han dynasty, also the prime minister of Changsha Country, and the husband of Mrs Xinzhui. The owner of the tomb No. 3 is probably Lixi, the son of Licang and Xinzhui, who is also the second marquis of Dai. Their identities are confirmed in China's most famous history book *Records of the Grand Historian* (also known by its Chinese name *Shiji*, 史记) written by the Western Han historian Sima Qian. According to this book, Licang was given the title of marquis by emperor Hui in 193 BC when he was the prime minister of Changsha Country. In tomb No. 2, there were 3 seals carved separately 1: Licang (the name of the dead), 2: Marquis of Dai (the title of nobility), and 3: Prime minister of Changsha (the official position, figure 3.7). This double verification of excavated cultural relics and ancient history book not only confirms the identity of the tomb owner, but also proves the accuracy and continuity of historical records in Chinese tradition.



figure 3. 7 One of excavated seals, carved: Prime Minister of Changsha (长沙丞相).

(Hunan Museum)

Although the marquis Licang and his son Lixi were mentioned in ancient

records, the marquis' wife, Mrs Xinzhui has never been mentioned. The archaeological finding of Mawangdui gives us an opportunity to discover the life of this lady and her family as well as the society of 2,000 years ago. Collating historical records and excavated relics, archaeologists believe that Mrs Xinzhui married the marquis, about 20 years older than her, when she was about 15. When she was about thirty, the marquis Licang died and was buried in Mawangdui tomb no. 2. At that time, their son Lixi was only a teenage boy and could not inherit the position of prime minister, so he only inherited the title of nobility and became the second marquis of Dai (Shan 2014). When he grew up, he was likely to become a military general, because a large number of weapons and military books were excavated in tomb no. 3, and he died in his thirties (Xu 2003). The cause of their deaths has not been mentioned in recent researches. The osteological studies of these two skeletons and the latter situations of the skeletons are unknown, possibly because Mrs Xinzhui were so special that scholars ignored the skeletons. A few years after Lixi's death, Mrs Xinzhui died of a heart attack in her fifties and was buried in Mawangdui tomb no. 1.

### **3.3.2 Life of 2000 years ago**

Mrs Xinzhui lived a very rich and even luxurious life, which can be seen from the scale of her burial goods which can rival some royal tombs (Zhang 2010). Mrs Xinzhui and her family lived at the early western Han dynasty, at that time the emperor stipulated that all tombs could not be buried with gold and silver goods

because the whole country had not recovered from previous wars (Shan 2014). It is true that none of the three tombs were unearthed with gold and silver, which is corresponding to historical records. However, a large number of exquisite lacquerware were used as substitutes. At that time, the price of one lacquerware was ten times that of a bronze ware of the same size. The tomb goods, from everyday cutlery, to containers for foods, books and clothing, and sets of toiletries (figure 3.8), all the things that people need in their lives are represented, giving present archaeologists an opportunity to fully understand the life of people more than 2,000 years ago. Meanwhile, the large number of silk and bamboo manuscripts excavated from the tombs contain more than 120,000 Chinese characters, covering history, politics, astronomy, geography, medicine, nutrition, military theory and philosophy of that time. This includes the China's earliest surviving astronomical book, *the five star atlas* (五星占) (figure 3.9), which recorded the Venus synodic period of 584.4 days, only half a day longer than currently measured (Yu 2017).



figure 3. 8 One of the excavated lacquerwares, used as toiletry. (Hunan Museum)



figure 3. 9 The astronomical book, *the five star atlas* (五星占). (Hunan Museum)





figure 3. 10 The T-shape silk painting. (Hunan Museum)

Meanwhile, a large silk painting (figure 3.10) was found covering the fourth layer of inner coffins. This silk painting, with a capital T shape, shows western Han people's world view of life and death at that time. The content of the painting can be divided into three parts, respectively representing heaven, earth and underworld. There is a giant standing on an ancient turtle at the bottom of the picture, holding up the human world. An old woman with a cane, the Mrs Xinzhui, is standing in the middle of the picture, facing to the left, with her servants. In the sky, there is a goddess with a human head and a snake body, which is believed the creator of human, named NvWa. At the left top, it is the moon with a frog and a rabbit, at the right top, nine suns are presented, and the biggest sun is transformed from a golden

bird. This is the picture of the afterlife world that Mrs Xinzhui believed. The silk painting is supposed to be a flag used in funeral rituals to guide the soul, a custom can also be seen in more recent China, to point the way to another world for the dead (Du 2012). Unlike the Christian belief that the afterlife is divided into two opposites, heaven and hell, Mrs Xinzhui's belief, more precisely her worldview, holds that the world of the living and the world of the dead are continuous and similar. Her huge amount of tomb goods is the guarantee for her to continue a decent life in the world of the dead (Chen 2003). After her death, her soul will go to the other world to realize the eternal dream.

Although there are still many unanswered questions about Mrs Xinzhui's life, and it is likely that these questions will never be answered. Those unearthed and studied ancient relics are rich enough for archaeologists and the general public to go back through time and take a look at ancient China of more than 2,000 years ago.

### **3.4 Displays and curation**

The large number of precious burial goods had been buried for more than two thousand years, accompanying their 'eternal' master in silence, but now they have been given new meanings and values in the modern context. Ever since the excavation, HM has been exploring for a better way of exhibition, trying to give the public a more comprehensive understanding of the history of China's western Han dynasty.

### **3.4.1 A short display after excavation**

Few days after Mrs Xinzhui was excavated in 1972, the news that archaeologists dug out a thousand-years-old female corpse in the Mawangdui area spread quickly throughout Changsha city. The nickname 'old lady' (老太太, a relatively neutral term for all older women) has also spread among citizens to avoid the direct use of some unrespectful terms like 'female corpse' or 'ancient dead' (Shan 2014). Every day, many citizens gathered in front of the museum hoping to see the 'old lady', and requisitions for the museum to open a public display are getting louder. On 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1972, the HM opened a temporary exhibition with three display rooms, one to display some excavated cultural relics, one to present models and brief descriptions of the archaeological site, and one to display the Mrs Xinzhui. At that time, the display of the ancient corpse was very simple and thoughtless. There was no interpretation, no other relevant relics or objects, only the female's body lying in a coffin full of antiseptic solution, covered with a plexiglass plate and surrounded by wooden railings. However, the enthusiasm for the exhibition had far exceeded the museum's expectations, with more than 10,000 visitors a day. The exhibition room was not big enough and can allow only thirty visitors to enter at one time. The queue waiting at the gate was several kilometres at most, and all the staff had become security guards to maintain the order (Shan 2014).

Just a few days later, things started to get out of hand, with people even sneaking into the museum and the glass doors of the exhibition rooms collapsed by

crowded visitors (Shan 2014). The museum was concerning that on one side, such a large-scale visit will cause damage to the exhibits and the ancient corpse, while the other side is that a sudden closure of the exhibition will cause large-scale dissatisfaction and protest. The museum chose to report some details of the archaeological excavation as well as the plight of the display to the central government, and the report finally reached the premier Zhou Enlai. After premier Zhou realised the particularity of the ancient corpse, he immediately instructed that: 'ancient Chinese people had kept (the corpse) for thousands of years, and we must keep (the corpse) for at least 200 years'. As for the excessive enthusiasm of the exhibition, the premier Zhou said that the protection of cultural relics should be put into the first place. He asked the HM to 'promise the people of Changsha that the suspension of the exhibition is only for the purpose of research. The public should understand' (Yu & Wang 2014). On June 17, the temporary exhibition, which lasted less than a month, was suspended, and the ancient corpse was quietly transported to Hunan Medical College for preparation of later autopsy. Although scholars have not made any comments on this short exhibition, it can be seen that the general public has great curiosity of this special exhibition, or precisely the ancient undecayed female corpse. But this crazy curiosity does neither come from the yearning for ancient history and ancient culture, nor from the scientific explanation of mystery things, but simply from the abnormal phenomenon and the hidden horror imagination behind the ancient female corpse.

### **3.4.2 Display since 1974 to 2002**

After that, the ancient corpse had not been shown for two years for better preservation and researches. In 1974, with the financial support of Chinese central government, a new exhibition building was built to store and study the cultural relics unearthed in the three tombs of Mawangdui, as well as Mrs Xinzhui. An exhibition hall at the underground floor was specially designed to preserve Mrs Xinzhui. Considering the more stable underground environment, and also to simulate the burial environment before excavation, a large pit was dug out (figure 3.11), in which Mrs Xinzhui's coffin was placed. The roof is made of special glass so visitors can look down from the ground floor to see Mrs Xinzhui. This specially designed exhibition hall meets the needs of both preservation and exhibition at the same time, ensuring the visibility of the ancient corpse while preserving in a stable, isolated and controllable environment. This hall was initially open only to important visitors such as leaders of other countries. It was not until 1976 that Mrs Xinzhui began to open up to the whole society under the strong demand of the masses. Such exhibition continued into the early 21st century.



figure 3. 11 Mrs Xinzhuai 'buried' in a deep pit. (Hunan Museum)

### 3.4.3 Display since 2002 to 2012

In 2002, the construction of a new main building of the HM was completed, and Mrs Xinzhuai was moved there. Similar exhibition and storage methods for Mrs Xinzhuai had been used here, along with selected relics displayed at other exhibition rooms. The title of the room for Mrs Xinzhuai was named by curators as 'Remained appearance of thousands years' (千古遗容, a rhetoric which is more respectful). Unlike the previous one, 'display of female corpse', the new title avoided overly explicit words while hinting at the display in the room (Chen 2012). Chen Jianming (2012), the former director of HM, mentions that when discussing the new display of Mrs Xinzhuai at the end of last century, some curators proposed to display the corpse at the forefront of the whole exhibition to highlight the importance of the ancient corpse and give the audience a visual impact. This proposal was rejected because the

social duty of museums is to 'educate and guide the public', not to indulge the curiosity of the audience or simply to attract the public (Chen 2012). This awareness of the museum's social responsibilities was reflected in the entire Mawangdui exhibition. The curators designed the route for the audience, putting Mrs Xinzhui's display room at the end of the route. Before seeing the ancient corpse, the audience can have a comprehensive understanding of the history of Mrs Xinzhui's family and the culture of the western Han dynasty through the selected cultural relics and interpretations.

#### **3.4.4 Display since 2017**

The HM was closed in 2012 for expansion and renovation developments and reopened in 2017. The exhibition of the Mawangdui tombs was redesigned with more thoughtful and more respectful curation. The whole exhibition occupies three floors and is divided into four theme parts. The order of the tour is still dictated. Starting from the second floor, the four exhibition themes are: 'striking finding', 'life and art', 'bamboo and silk books' and 'dream of immortality'. The first three parts are based on the cultural relics excavated by archaeologists, which show the details of the Mrs Xinzhui's family and the life and culture of the western Han dynasty. The fourth thematic exhibition, the 'dream of immortality', is on the ground floor, displaying the four inner coffins and Mrs Xinzhui's body. When visitors go into this floor, the first thing presented is the biggest inner coffin with a darker light, followed by three others, from large to small. By doing so, the possible fears of suddenly seeing the dead bodies can be alleviated, using the natural connection between the

coffin and the body to prepare the visitors for the upcoming meeting with the ancient corpse.

Similar to previous displays, the body is still lying in a deep pit for the more stable environment. But this time the pit is designed to imitate the original deep-buried tomb, suggesting that Mrs Xinzhui is 'buried' there. Meanwhile, a more elegant consideration can be seen from the new title of this thematic exhibition, 'dream of immortality'. Instead of emphasizing how ancient the corpse is, no matter in an explicit or implicit way, the new title is suggesting that Mrs Xinzhui is sleeping here for a long time, keeping achieving her dream of immortality. According to the director of research office of the HM, Yu Yanjiao (2017) states that when curators planned the new Mawangdui exhibition, they considered the whole exhibition as a complete work of art, from the thoughtful use of text to the combination of lighting and display cabinets, from the choosing of contents to the arrangement of visiting route.

### **3.5 Discussion**

From the history of HM, it can be seen that the excavation of the western Han dynasty tombs of Mawangdui has exerted a great influence on the development of the museum. The large number of excavated cultural relics and this unique ancient female corpse allow archaeologists to comprehensively study the history of the western Han dynasty from many aspects and make HM a leader in the study of the western Han dynasty. More importantly, the Mawangdui site has brought national



level attention and plenty of funds, allowing many senior researchers and curators to gather here. Abundant cultural relics and years of research give curators a wealth of content to choose from, meanwhile, adequate funds supported by both provincial and central governments allow them to fully explore better ways of the exhibition.

When it comes to the display of the ancient female corpse, a restrained and thoughtful manner with respect can be seen from the display methods. It is a worldwide consensus that the museum displays of human remains should show full respect. Although China did not participate in the human remains discussion and has no relevant legislations and policies, the respect for the remains of ancestors can still be seen, especially in the case of the Mawangdui exhibition. The curators tried to be as respectful as possible while ensuring that visitors can still see the body. As an exhibition open to all members of the public, museums and curators cannot control how visitors view the corpse, but they do have a way of guiding the audience to think of the body as a Chinese ancestor who once lived. Through the designed exhibition route, audiences can make a gradual mental preparation before seeing the ancient corpse. Through the exhibition of daily life and social culture of two thousand years ago, the connection between modern life and ancient society can be established. Through the display of the wealth and exquisite life obtained by Mrs Xinzhuai, audiences can feel a kind of awe of the old marquise.

Simultaneously, the curators' respect for the ancient corpse is not only reflected in the concept of modern culture, but also in the understanding and respect from the perspective of Mrs Xinzhuai. The method and the manner of this

display can echo with Mrs Xinzhui's own ideology to some extent. Mrs Xinzhui hoped to be buried in the ground forever, letting her spirit live in the other world with her treasure and without anyone's disturbance. Two thousand years later, this wish has been broken by archaeologists, and it would obviously be against her will to be studied and displayed. But when the fate of being studied and displayed cannot be changed, at least she could still lie 'under' the ground where she lived, her treasure still accompanies her in a same building, and most importantly, her once believed 'dream of immortality' has been understood by the world.

Although neither Chinese museum regulations and policies nor official documents of the HM mention that human remains should be displayed with full respect and dignity, it can still be found from actual practices, at least in the case of Mrs Xinzhui. This consideration of respect and dignity is more like a spontaneous act, derived from the conscious respect for the elders, ancestors and deceased in traditional Chinese culture. And this spontaneous respect is shared by all Chinese people who have grown up in Chinese society. All the curators' efforts in showing respect can be perceived and recognized by the vast majority of the audience without a literal emphasis.

## **Chapter 4. Reasons of China's absence**

From the case study of the HM, it can be seen that China does have displayed human remains, and respect and dignity have been taken into thoughtful consideration. But Chinese museums have never joined this worldwide debate, and even more so, Chinese curators and archaeologists rarely discuss it. Even curators like Chen and Yu, who were directly involved in Mrs Xinzhui's exhibition planning, have only simply mentioned their respect for the ancient corpse in a few paragraphs (Chen 2012; Yu 2017), and these articles did not receive any academical response. To answer the question that why china has been out of this human remains debate, four possible reasons will be analysed from aspects of 'repatriation', 'authority', 'traditional culture' and 'display tendency' in this chapter.

### **4.1 No repatriation claims**

One of the reasons that the debate has become so prevalent and international is the claims calling for the repatriation and/or reburial of human remains on display in museums. Those claim campaigns have brought the debate to a broader level. However, repatriation campaigns have never touched China, and there is therefore no broader discussion caused by the politically related repatriation campaigns.

#### **4.1.1 No claims from outside**

China does not have problems of repatriation claims from other countries demanding the return of human remains. This is because of the different historical

experiences in different countries. Britain has a long history of colonizing other countries, and many explorers had brought back many cultural relics from different parts of the world, such as many cultural relics from Egypt and China displayed in the British Museum. In addition to historical artefacts, there are, of course, human remains. Some British museums have been asked to repatriate human remains collected from colonists and explorers who had been to different parts of the world during the colonial era. Such international affairs, based on correcting historical 'errors', naturally become a political topic. In particular, the joint declaration signed by the British and Australian prime ministers in July 2000 set the framework for the repatriation of human remains from the UK:

The Australian and British governments agree to increase efforts to repatriate human remains to Australian indigenous communities. In doing this the government recognises the special connection that indigenous people have with ancestral remains, particularly where there are living descendants (Howard 2000).

That, along with the *Guidance* in 2005 and other policies, made the repatriation of indigenous human remains an important part of the discussion.

Unlike the UK, which had a long history of external colonization, China had always been the destination of many colonial countries, such as Britain, Spain and Portugal since 1840s, and has not entered other countries to carry out colonial activities. Without a history of colonizing other countries, there is no human remains obtained from other countries and no subsequent repatriation claims.

#### **4.1.2 No claims inside China**

Not only have there been no claims from other countries for the repatriation of human remains, but there have also been no claims from inside-China groups for the reburial of human remains held in museums. In Britain, spontaneous civil groups such as HAD and CoBDO launched the campaign for the reburial of some British ancient human remains. They attempt to legitimize their claims by emphasizing their spiritual and cultural connections to those human remains. Their campaigns may have been inspired by the success of indigenous groups' repatriation claims of some museum-held human remains (Jenkins 2016), and their campaigns, whether justified or not, successful or not, have further strengthened the impact of the human remains debate.

In China, the absence of repatriation claims from abroad indigenous groups as well as the absence of potential political clout that comes with the claims make it hard for Chinese media, academics and the general public to engage in such discussions. Without national discussion and popularity which can be comparable to that in the UK, it is hard to generate much public attention, let alone civil campaign groups, even if some individuals want to reconsider the human remains in museums.

#### **4.1.3 No claims to the outside**

Simultaneously, China, a country once invaded by colonialists, has not made the repatriation claims as other countries' indigenous communities for human remains. It is not that Chinese human remains have not been taken abroad. On the

contrary, some foreign archaeologists had taken some naturally mummified ancient bodies abroad as research materials during the colonial years. In 1912, Japanese explorers Kitsu Zuichou and Kichikawa Koichirou found several naturally mummified ancient corpses from a large group of ancient tombs in Turpan, Xinjiang, and shipped some of them to Japan. In 1914, British archaeologist Marc Aurel Stein excavated 48 tombs in the same area and brought back a head of a mummified ancient corpse (Liu 2001). However, no one has been concerned about the situations of these Chinese ancestors who have been sent abroad, and the Chinese government has made no claims of their repatriation. This is not because Chinese people and Chinese culture lack respect for ancestors. Inversely, respecting ancestors and remembering history is a very important part of Chinese culture. It is likely that precious cultural relics accounted for a much larger proportion of what the colonists took away from China, causing Chinese to ignore the remains of their ancestors, whose scientific and cultural value is relatively less.

Over the past few decades, the Chinese government has repeatedly demanded the return of stolen cultural relics from former colonial powers. Since 2002, the National Cultural Heritage Administration (国家文物局. Subsequently: NCHA) has allocated an annual fund of 50 million RMB to buy Chinese cultural relics lost abroad<sup>5</sup>. But these activities are only for cultural relics and not for the remains of Chinese ancestors.

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<sup>5</sup> National Cultural Heritage Administration. [http://www.sach.gov.cn/art/2006/5/10/art\\_722\\_110995.html](http://www.sach.gov.cn/art/2006/5/10/art_722_110995.html). Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019.

## **4.2 State-hold authority**

The repatriation of human remains is a focus of the debate, but British scholars did not stop with those claimed human remains. The debate has been extended to all human remains in museums. This expansion has led some scholars and museum managers to reconsider the traditional authority and social responsibility of museums. Jenkins (2008; 2011; 2016) argues that those claim campaigns to human remains are driven not only by external pressures but also by the rethinking of the traditional authority within museums. The transfer of the museum's traditional inherent authority is also reflected in the case of the Manchester Museum. The activity of covering the mummy to stimulate public discussions on the ethics of museum exhibition is a challenge and reflection on the museums' original identity as the legislator of knowledge (Jenkins 2011; Exell 2016). This kind of doubt from experts within the museum along with the practice of transferring the authority to the public have deepened the discussion on the human remains issue in British. But in China, the authority of museums is held firmly by experts, or precisely, by the government, making such questions unlikely to happen.

### **4.2.1 State-hold museums**

A clear dividing line for the history of museum development was the founding of the PRC in 1949. On the one hand, after the establishment of the new government, the relatively stable social development enables China's museum industry to

gradually get on the right track. On the other hand, China's new museum system has been firmly built into the government system. Chinese museums have been divided into regional, provincial and national levels according to their different scales and locations, and they are managed by their local NCHA and funded by the government finance. Although they do have freedom in the management of their collections and academic researches, the appointment and removal of their leaders must be decided by the government, and their exhibitions must meet the government's expectations. According to the *Museum Regulations*<sup>6</sup> issued by the State Council of the PRC in 2015, 'museums should stick to the direction of serving the people and socialism.....so as to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of the masses' (Article 3), and '10 working days prior to the start of an exhibition, museum should report the exhibition's themes, descriptions and interpretations to the executive government, and exhibitions should be under the government's guidance and supervision' (Article 31). Although there are private museums in China, their scale and influence cannot be compared with those of state-owned museums, and private museums are also subject to the *Museum Regulations* and other policies. Under such a system, it is difficult to challenge the authority of Chinese museums on exhibition and interpretation no matter the challenge come from inside or outside, and it also makes it difficult to happen for those discussions that may question the authority of museums.

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<sup>6</sup> National Cultural Heritage Administration. The State Council of the PRC. 2015. *Museum Regulations* (in Chinese). <http://www.sach.gov.cn/col/col1806/index.html>. Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019.



#### **4.2.2 Authority in interpretation**

For most Chinese museums, although their exhibitions need to be conducted under the supervision of the government, they still have a high degree of autonomy in the exhibition theme and interpretation, such as the HM and its years of exploration for a proper exhibition method of Mrs Xinzhui. But in some cases, the interpretation of some special exhibition in the museum is not to be challenged and questioned. One example is the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in Nanjing, Jiangsu province. Although the Memorial Hall is more like a world war ii memorial than a 'museum' in the traditional sense, it is a Chinese state-owned museum and was rated as a national first-class museum in 2008. The Memorial Hall is built at the place where a large number of people were killed and buried during the 1937 massacre. It is built to commemorate the victims and to remember this painful historical event. Here, archaeologists unearthed 208 human skeletons in the 1980s and identified them as the massacre victims (Zhu 2002, p45-56). A special exhibition hall (figure 4.1) was built at the excavation site, and archaeologists restored the position of the skeletons after the research was completed. The remains of these victims are stored and displayed here, receiving the condolences of people.



figure 4. 1 Remains of the victims in the Nanjing 1937 massacre and visitors. (Online resource: <http://jnrb.e23.cn/jnsb/20181215/2faea0cfc453d2c146deb79afe5dfa86.jpg>. Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2019)

This is, of course, a very special exhibition of human remains because all these remains of victims have just dead for less than one hundred years and may still have grandchildren alive. Such sensitive display may raise many ethical questions and discussions, but here, no one questioned that. The Memorial Hall chose to display the remains in this way so that people can 'see' the massacre directly. With the interpretation of the remains as witnesses, this exhibition has become a kind of display of incontrovertible evidence of the massacre. In order to remind people of this painful history, the Nanjing massacre has been written into textbooks, and the national memorial day and other activities are held every year to commemorate compatriots who died in the war. All Chinese people will know this history, so when they enter the museum, they can have psychological empathy and sympathy for the remains on display. In this case, the display of these sensitive human remains is

justified because the authorities have given a reasonable, sacred and incontrovertible interpretation for the display.

### **4.3 Changed traditional culture**

In traditional Chinese culture, the absolute worship of ancestors and the cautious attitude towards the dead body and funeral are very important. The activity of displaying ancestors' bodies would be viewed as a great disrespect. In the modern Chinese society, traditional culture and funeral rituals have gradually changed, which is one of the reasons why the display of human remains can be seen in some museums and has not aroused much discussion. However, the traditional culture has changed but not disappeared, proper respect and reasonable motivation of human remains display should still be shown in museums.

#### **4.3.1 Changed ideology and burial ritual**

Some traditional ideas are quite directly related to the human remains issue. Firstly, the 'filial piety' (孝) is a very important culture in Chinese traditional society, even in modern China, it is also a virtue strongly advocated. As an old Chinese saying goes, 'filial piety is the foundation of all virtues' (百善孝为先), which reflects the importance Chinese culture attaches to this idea. It requires people to be kind and respectful not only to their own parents, but also to all other elders. Secondly, this kind of filial piety to parents and elders also extended to the attitude towards the body. 'Body, hair and skin, all come from parents, dare not to damage' (身体发肤, 受

之父母，不敢毁伤) is a traditional saying, showing that traditional Chinese culture attaches great importance to the body. This idea is also reflected in the attitude towards the dead and funerals. Although the desire for the body not to decay is strong, Chinese burial culture has never processed any modification directly on the body. Thirdly, an idiom from the Ming dynasty, 'Burial brings peace' (入土为安), indicates the importance attached to burying the dead in traditional Chinese thought. It means proper burial for the dead can give rest to the dead and peace to the living. Some scholars deem that Chinese people's emphasis on burial comes from the traditional farming culture of China, which regards land and soil as very important living resources (Zeng 2010).

When scientific archaeology started in China in the 1930s, it was because of these traditional cultures that there was a debate about the rationality of archaeology. People who object to archaeologists' excavation of ancient tombs used these traditional cultural ideas as a basis for their rebuttal (Zhang 2012; Luo 1998).

However, in modern China, there have been enormous changes in people's adherence to and understanding of these traditional cultures. This change comes not only from the modernization and urbanization process of Chinese society but also from the change of funeral ceremony. In order to avoid the occupation of farmland by traditional burials and the health problems they may cause, China began to implement mandatory cremation in some areas in the 1980s. The *Regulations on the Administration of Funerals* came into force in 1997, introducing mandatory cremation across the country. This practice of cremation has changed the traditional

idea of burial into symbolic thinking and reduced the Chinese people's emphasis on the sanctity of the body. This change, along with the fast-food culture, film and television culture and western thinking brought by the development of modern society has further changed Chinese people's views on traditional Chinese culture. Chinese people have become more receptive to new things because of these cultural changes. Seeing the display of human remains in a museum would not be a difficult experience for people who have accepted the new culture and new society. At the same time, museums will provide appropriate exhibition environment and reasonable interpretation for human remains displayed in their exhibitions, without which the exhibition cannot be approved by the government, so that the public can understand the reasons behind such displays.

#### **4.3.2 Cautious displays**

The history of Chinese museums is much shorter than that of western societies, and there is a lack of gradual development. Without experience to draw from, Chinese museums have to be cautious and conservative in their practice. Such a situation is more obvious in the display of human remains. In the UK, the display of human remains in museums has a long history, and these remains, whether displayed for curiosity or science, have been generally accepted by the British (Swain 2013; 2016). But in China, the social impact of such sensitive displays can be unpredictable, especially at the particular historical stage when traditional culture is changing and new ideas are forming. Take China's *body worlds* exhibition as an

example. Although some scholars and curators have recognized the significance of this special exhibition from the perspective of scientific value and introduced it to China, the social influence and criticize brought by it still show that the Chinese public has a low acceptance for this kind of exhibition which is too direct. After a few years, the *body worlds* exhibition has been pulled out of China, and reports of it have never been seen again. No one has said why the exhibition stopped, but 'Chinese people are culturally unreceptive' could be one reason. While for other museums which have human remains on display, a clear and understandable motivation must be presented to avoid possible social doubt, such as the HM and the Memorial Hall in Nanjing.

#### **4.4 Display tendency on cultural relics**

A clear tendency to display cultural relics can be seen in Chinese museum exhibitions. When people think about museums, their first reaction is usually precious gold and silver products, historical bronzes, exquisite traditional Chinese paintings and so on. This tendency makes human remains in museums very rare compared to other 'normal' exhibits. Visitors are quite acceptable to the absence of human remains in the museum, or, in other words, they will not think about why there are no human remains here.

##### **4.4.1 Chinese antiquarianism**

Modern scientific archaeology is a subject imported from the west, but

antiquarianism has a history of one thousand years in China. It originated from Ouyang Xiu's study of ancient inscriptions on gold and stone relics in the northern Song dynasty (960AD-1127AD), and gradually developed to the study of ancient calligraphy, painting and handicrafts (Xu 2016). Traditional Chinese antiquarianism is considered to be the predecessor of Chinese archaeology (Ma 2010; Zha 2008). The traditional antiquarianism was popular among the upper class of society, by studying the words on the objects or the precious objects themselves to get a better understanding of the history. This tradition influenced the later development of archaeology, which led archaeologists to focus on the unearthed cultural relics.

Simultaneously, at the beginning of the development of archaeology in China, the excavation of ancient people's tombs for scientific research was questioned by many, which was regarded as a great disrespect to ancestors. Archaeologists refuted with the importance of ancient tombs for the study of history, society and culture, but still acknowledging that to show proper respect to ancestors, excavated human remains should be reburied in situ after excavation, with appropriate rituals when possible (Zhang 2012).

Besides, the emphasis on filial piety in traditional Chinese culture makes people attach the same importance to funerals. A funeral with plenty of precious grave goods is not only a symbol of family wealth but also an embodiment of children's filial piety to their dead relatives. Such traditional Chinese burial custom had left rich cultural resources for archaeologists.

All these aspects adds up to a neglect of human remains in tombs in Chinese

archaeology, which come from both cultural awe and relatively less research value in the remains.

#### **4.4.2 Rarely found special corpses**

The value of 'ordinary' human remains has been ignored by archaeologists in China, but 'special' ancient corpses, such as the aforementioned 'wet bodies' and 'dry bodies', have attracted researchers' attention due to their high research value. However, although no investigation has been carried out into the scale of special corpses unearthed in China, their numbers are relatively low (Kou 2013). Relatively rare discoveries and greatly different preservation conditions make it difficult for museums to conduct systematic research, and also make it difficult for such special exhibitions to have a great impact on society. Besides, scholars' and the society's attention to the special ancient corpses is still related to the value of their tomb goods rather than just the particularity of the corpse itself. For example, the ancient male corpse of western Han dynasty in the Jingzhou Municipal Museum had similar protection methods with Mrs Xinzhui, and his preservation condition may be better than Mrs Xinzhui's (Chen 2006). But the research scale, exhibition treatment as well as social awareness is far less than Mrs Xinzhui's. This difference maybe because he did not have the high social status of Mrs Xinzhui, nor did he have so many precious tomb goods.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Human remains in the museum is a complex issue, and this chapter explores



possible explanation of China's absence of this issue from several aspects. Repatriation and reburial claims are one of the reasons why this issue has come up and grown. Without these claims, it would be difficult to raise concerns about human remains to a national political level. Simultaneously, both Chinese museums and the authority of interpretation are held firmly in the government, making their exhibitions and interpretations acceptable to the public, reducing the possibility of questioning the content and rationality of their exhibitions. Besides, the lack of human remains on display in Chinese museums makes the large-scale social discussion unlikely to happen. For the scarcity of displayed human remains, it stems from (a) the emphasis on filial piety in traditional Chinese culture, (b) the tendency of Chinese museums to display precious cultural relics, and (c) The rarity of special ancient corpses which are favoured by museums. Although in recent decades, Chinese traditional culture has been influenced and changed in many ways to some extent, which increases the public's acceptance of some sensitive things. But a too direct display of human remains, such as the *body worlds*, still raises questions and cultural discomfort.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

For museum displayed human remains, whether it's an articulated skeleton or Bone fragments, a bog body or an Egyptian mummy, an undecomposed corpse or cremated ashes, their fate after death has been changed by archaeologists' excavations and museum exhibitions. In some cases, their stories during their lifetime are re-opened by archaeologists and presented to the living people by curators through careful consideration and respect, making the past dead 'resurge' in people's understanding and respect. Or in other cases, their identities, occupations, and even genders have been misunderstood by scientists and the public, changefully interpreted by different scholars at different times and with different techniques. Perhaps in more cases, they simply play the role of a nameless past dead, continuing their unpredictable after-live adventures with the various narratives that scientists have given them.

From a scientific point of view, no matter how human remains are treated posthumously, they are still cold, lifeless remains. But museum exhibitions cannot be thought of in this cold scientific light. The museum is a bridge between science and the public. It plays the role as a mediator between the objective truth of science in the one end and the emotions and culture of the public in the other end. It provides accesses and interpretations of its collections to the public, and simultaneously be influenced by the expectations and benefits of its audiences. When visitors witness human remains in the museum, an innate empathy may occur because the human remains on display are also those who once lived and the way how museums treat

human remains can have a reflection on their visitors. Bearing this in mind, it would not be hard to understand why respect for human remains is written into the ICoM *Code* in 1986 since respect for human and human remains has been acknowledged as a recognition shared by cultures around the world. Such a role as mediator persists in museums no matter it is in Britain or China, at decades ago or at present.

The display of human remains is a sophisticated and sensitive issue, and the question of how human remains should be displayed with respect has been constantly debated while still hard to settle. From the case study of Mrs Xinzhui and the exhibition, it can be seen that the HM has indeed shown respect for Mrs Xinzhui, and their efforts to explore a respectful way have been recognized by the society. However, this case has its own particularity, and its specific exhibition method may be difficult to be applied by other museums because many unearthed human remains do not have as many burial goods to build a complete context.

While one aspect that can be referenced is their concentration on culture in the displays. On the one hand, this culture refers to the cultural backgrounds of Mrs Xinzhui and her time obtained from archaeological excavation and researches. No matter how the exhibition is changed, the curators are committed to presenting the art, philosophy, society and life of the western Han dynasty in a way that can be understood by their audience. By reducing the distance between contemporary society and the western Han dynasty, audiences can culturally and emotionally experience the display of Mrs Xinzhui as a once-lived person, not a cold body. On the other hand, this culture also refers to the contemporary culture shared by curators

and the audience. From the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, the display of ancestors' bodies is an act of great disrespect. But the archaeological and exhibition value of this particular body is too important to be lost. Besides, the Chinese public's curiosity about this corpse is intense, which can be seen from the popularity of the initial simple display. To mediate all these different aspects, the museum chose to display Mrs Xinzhui in an underground tomb-like manner, which has reduced possible cultural controversy, and has also curbed public's wild curiosity by the limited access.

Mrs Xinzhui's exhibition is a good example that human remains are displayed with great respect. The particularity of this corpse itself along with the rich burial goods has brought lots of attention and funding to the museum, giving the curators enough space to explore a more appropriate display. As stated by Nordström (2016, p227), 'the more attention and care we devote to them, the more immortal they become'. Those special human remains, which may be considered scientifically significant by archaeologists or interesting by society, have received more attention and ethical consideration. It is true that our perceptions and interpretations of them have been changing and will still change as the technology generates, but it is this constant and generated attention that makes them immortal once again in museum exhibitions and mass media. And we, the living, can keep on deepening our perspectives of death and mortality through our constant interaction with these immortals.

In addition to the case study of the HM and Mrs Xinzhui, this paper has also summarized some possible reasons for Chinese museums' absence from the

international human remains debate. This inattention to the study and discussion of human remains coincides with the general lack of human remains display in China. Besides the background of no repatriation claims, the Chinese museum system and Chinese traditional culture have great influences on the lack of both aspects. In Chinese museums' practices, two kinds of preference can be identified, one is the preference to display cultural artefacts instead of human remains, and the other is the preference to display special corpses but ordinary archaeological remains. This double bias has led to the overlook of the importance of general archaeological remains and their potential stories for both scholars and society. As indicated by Howard Williams (2016), the academic and exhibition overlook exists in the cremated human remains compared with articulated skeletons, bog bodies and mummies in Britain and parts of Europe. He stressed the importance of cremated remains in museums to understand past cremations and death ways, and the irreplaceable role that cremated human remains can play in understanding past mortuary activities. Here, I have no intention of criticizing the practical preference and the bias of Chinese museums, but stating as a reminder that the so-called ordinary 'useless' human remains can play a role in provoking the public's understanding of life and death if displayed in a respectful method and under a proper context.

For the human remains in Chinese museums in a broader context, this research is still far from enough. The limitation of this article lies in the dependence on literature research and the lack of relevant literature in China. The discussion of the problem in this paper focused on the theoretical level, and specific questionnaire

survey and field investigation are needed to make this study more comprehensive. Future researches and surveys can start from the precise scale of human remains in Chinese museums, the attitudes of tourists in specific exhibitions, the interview of museum curators and so on. Thus, more accurate and comprehensive research background on this issue in China can be obtained. Similarly, more discussions and researches are needed on the interaction between Chinese traditional culture and changing modern culture and the display of human remains, as well as the necessity and appropriate methods of the display of human remains in Chinese museums.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

In order to find the answer of why China has been absent from the human remains debate, this article reviewed the situations of human remains displayed in museums in both Britain and China, and there's a huge difference in the level of concern between the two countries. Human remains in museums are largely overlooked in China from both perspectives of theory and practice. This is not to say that China has not explored the display of human remains in museums. On the contrary, the Hunan Museum and its display of Mrs Xinzhui is a good example of the respectful display of human remains in China. One important reason for China's neglect of the worldwide debate is that there is no repatriation claims to take the issue to a national political level. Simultaneously, the state-held museum system in China ensures that museums have the authority over exhibitions and interpretations, making the social role of museums as legislators of knowledge more stable and unchallengeable. Besides, modern Chinese culture challenged the traditional idea of absolute worship of ancestors, making the display of human remains in museums acceptable to society and reducing the possibility of disputes. In addition, Chinese archaeology has long attached great importance to cultural relics, leading museums and the public to have a preference to exquisite cultural relics and undervalue the exhibition of human remains in museums.

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